Justice Dept. Scans Role of F.B.I. on Oswald Note

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made two visits to a home where Oswald's wife was staying with a friend.

Despite the threatening language it contained, the letter was said to have evoked no extraordinary effort by the Dallas F.B.I. office to find Oswald, who had left the letter with an office receptionist in Mr. Hosty's name and then departed before it could be delivered.

The letter, the sources said, was simply made a part of Oswald's file. Mr. Hosty continued his efforts to find the former Marine rifleman, but they proved unavailing up to the time Mr. Kennedy was shot and killed while riding in a motorcade on a Dallas street.

Within days of the Kennedy assassination, sources said, the Oswald letter was removed from the fil eand destroyed. The chain of events that led to that destruction are the focus of an administrative inquiry now under way within the F.B.I.

It is in connection with that inquiry that the "conflicting statements" about the responsibility for destroying the letter were reported to have been made to F.B.I. investigators by present for former bureau personnel.

The Justice Department and the bureau have both declined all comment on the inquiry or the investigation. But one source said today that the department's Criminal Division was attempting to determine "whether there are criminal violations" involved in the contradicting statements.

Under Federal law, it is a felony for anyone, even another F.B.I. agent, to give a false statement knowingly to a Federal investigator.

Word Spreads Afar

F.B.I. officials were understood today to be distressed over the letter incident, which until a few weeks ago had not been known outside the bureau and not widely known within it.

Clarence M. Kelley, the bureau's director, reportedly knew nothing of the matter until the bureau received a query from a Dallas newspaper earlier this year about the possibility that such a letter had been destroyed.

The concern expressed privately by Mr. Kelley and others to associates within the bureau was said to stem not only from the embrassassment to the bureau for not having taken the Oswald threat seriously but also from the possibility that the matter could conceivably lead to the first criminal indictments of F.B.I. personnel.

Sources indicated today that it was by no means clear that such charges would be brought and pointed out that the five-year Federal statute of limitations had long since expired with respect to such substantive charges as obstruction of justice or destruction of evidence.

Both Agent Hosty and J. Edgar Hoover, the late F.B.I. director, told the Warren Commission investigation of the Kennedy assassination that they had no reason to believe that Oswald was capable of violence before the Kennedy shooting.

Mr. Hosty, who is now assigned to the bureau's Kansas City, Mo., office, did not return a reporter's telephone call today. But sources said that he had conceded to the F.B.I. investigators that he had destroyed the Oswald letter, although on orders from his superiors in the bureau. The conflicting statements in question apparently concern the responses given to some of his assertions by others.

Justice Dept. Scans Role Of F.B.I. on Oswald Note

By JOHN M. CREWDSON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 22—The Justice Department has begun a criminal investigation of the circumstances surrounding the destruction of a letter threatening the Dallas police that was delivered by Lee Harvey Oswald to the Dallas office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation shortly before the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

The investigation, which is being conducted by lawyers in the department's Criminal Division, was said by authoritative sources to be focusing on "conflicting statements" given by present and former F.B.I. agents and officials about their roles in, or knowledge of, the decision to destroy the letter following President Kennedy's murder on Nov. 22, 1963.

The letter reportedly contained a threat by Oswald, the accused assassin of the President, to "blow up" a Dallas police station unless the F.B.I. ceased its efforts to find and interview him and to stop what he desbribed as its harassment of his Russian-born wife, Marina.

According to several sources familiar with the results of a recently ordered administrative inquiry by the bureau into the incident, the Oswald letter made no mention of any intention to commit a murder or of any animosity toward Mr. Kennedy.

The F.B.I.'s efforts to find Oswald before the assassination were prompted by security interests and were based upon suspicion aroused because Oswald had taken up residence in the Soviet Union, renounced his American citizenship and then returned to the United States married to a Russian native.

The letter was delivered by Oswald to the bureau's Dallas field office in early November, 1973, after a special agent there, James P. Hosty Jr., had

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time had long since expired